

Costs of Ideologically Driven Conflicts: A Case of Nepal

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1. Background

My presentation draws on my PhD research on “Politics of Postconflict Peacebuilding in Nepal,” which I undertook between 2014 and 2020.

The terms ‘Postconflict Peacebuilding’ relate to the processes, procedures and institutions that underlie the implementation of the ‘Comprehensive Peace Agreement’ between the Nepali state and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-Maoist) that fought an armed conflict between 1996 and 2006.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (or CPA) was a negotiated settlement to the armed conflict agreed in November 2006. The CPA promised over 90 undertakings, under 10 headings, to be concluded within three and a half years. However, fourteen years on, almost half of them remain unimplemented.

In this background, my presentation tries to answer two questions:

- a. What are the drivers of armed conflict in Nepal?

Or

Why did it occur at the time it did?

- b. What have been its implications for Nepal?

Or

What are its costs?

1. The Drivers of the Conflict

Grievances related to **poverty** and **deprivation** are the main driver of the armed conflict. Discrimination (caste-based, gender and spatial) marginalisation, governance paralysis and resultant inequality have added to poverty and deprivation and contributed to a widespread sense of injustice along caste/ethnic and spatial lines. These are historical grievances and injustices, which the rulers of Nepal, both authoritarian and democratically elected, failed to address when they had an opportunity to do so.

The CPN (Maoist) exploited them using the communist slogan that “the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to

win.” To realise the slogan, the Maoists adopted the methodology of the ‘People’s War’ as practiced by Mao Tsetung, the founder of the People’s Republic of China.

The slogan appealed to the communities that were historically on the margin of majoritarian politics, which sought to maintain the socio-cultural status quo defined by the caste system. Already at the margin and losing on a number socio-economic fronts, the idea of winning a world – despite it being vague, abstract and even meaningless – was something to be taken note of. The Maoists tapped into this confusion that people had of their political proposal. They kept offering the ideology that the meaning of life was to win the world whatever costs that may incur. The Maoists used all the messes and sufferings around the people as the chains worth losing. The Maoist party, and the People’s War was the panacea for all the ills and problems, which the people at large were brainwashed – or forced otherwise – into listening to, if not believing.

If it were not the ideology – that the cure of ills requires a tough price and everyone should be ready to pay it – the armed conflict would not take place at least at the time and in the manner it did.

2. The Costs of the Conflict

- a. Usual costs of any conflict: loss of life and property. Over 18,000 people were killed and 1,500 disappeared, most of them young people, the bread earners of the family they came from. Those who fought to lose the chain (poverty or other ills) only lost their lives, not the chains. The loss is unlikely to be compensated.
- b. Billions worth of property were lost in plunder, destroyed infrastructure, security management during the conflict, decline in GDP and what they call as ‘opportunity lost’. And other billions in the management of arms and armies and other undertakings after the CPA, which would otherwise go for some form of development or other tasks that would benefit the people at large in a normal situation. The post-CPA order has not been able to provide rationale justification for these costs.
- c. Militarism is another cost of the conflict. Militaristic norms have pervaded Nepali society, which used to be otherwise known for its peaceable values. The use of force appears to be the norm to deal

with difference and disagreements at all levels. Violence used to shock the conscience, it is not necessarily so now.

In addition, there are a few crucial costs associated with the post-CPA process and outcomes.

- a. The promise of ‘state restructuring’ was one of the key CPA undertakings. It has a lot to do with spatial as well as horizontal inequalities. The CPA had promised ‘inclusive, democratic and progressive restructuring of the state.’ However, what has been settled in the post-CPA order is seemingly neither ‘inclusive’ nor ‘progressive.’ Just two years into existence, provincial governments formed after the CPA, have gone on record that the federal government has been unable to eschew the old unitary mindset on the question of power and resource sharing. As long as power and resources are not shared, the perception of topographical and ethnic discriminations in terms of access to the State – one of the drives of the armed conflict – will continue and Nepal returns back to square one as far as armed conflict is concerned.
- b. The post-CPA political order and elites have not been responsive to the needs and demands of victims. The plight of children used variously during the conflict have not been addressed. Nor of the pains and sufferings of women and the wounded. For them, the post-CPA order has been as inhumane and as unjust as any authoritarian regime would be.

In the face of continued politicisation of the transitional justice process over the last 14 years, international human rights organizations, have sternly warned the political elites that the victims would have no choice but “to approach courts outside the country ... to seek justice internationally under universal jurisdiction.” If this happens, which is likely, as the parties to conflict do not seem to be concerned about the victims, it will open up other issues and complications. Internally, the divide between political elites and victims will further widen. Externally, Nepal runs the risk of being trapped into regional and international geopolitics. None of this will contribute to peace.

- c. The most expensive price of the conflict is the derailing of the prospect of organic development of democracy and establishment of a tolerant and resilient social order in Nepal.

The ideology of 'breaking the chains to win the world' has in fact been a chain to prevent the growth of free, argumentative and creative thinking and impose a prototyped and caged worldview that does not allow peace to prosper, as peace requires engaging with free-flowing multiple, and at times conflicting, worldviews and ideas about politics and socio-cultural organizations practices.